

Where did I go wrong with Thabo Mbeki?

The man who has advised top leaders, from Clinton and Obama to Mandela, tells **Adrian Hadland** of his changing views on the ANC

FAMOUS pollster Stan Greenberg said former president Thabo Mbeki's tragic response to both the HIV/Aids crisis and the Zimbabwe meltdown had forced him to question his role in getting Mbeki and the ANC elected.

Greenberg was a key adviser to the ANC in its election campaigns in 1994 and 1999.

Greenberg was addressing a forum called "Difficult Dialogues" at UCT's medical school this week. The dialogues are being organised by the Economic Justice Initiative, supported by the Cape Argus, and are aimed at encouraging ordinary South Africans to deliberate on the present state of their communities.

The dialogues were also aimed at engendering a common purpose and future prosperity and security for all, according to EJI co-founder Wilmot James.

In his lecture, Greenberg said he was still supportive of the ANC and its mission, but his loyalty had been sorely tested by Mbeki's failure to address HIV/Aids and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people.

"As I reflect on these developments, what happened with the Mbeki silence on Aids and the



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deaths that were a consequence, and the silence on Zimbabwe, I view these as a blight on my work for the ANC, on my work to help Mbeki achieve the presidency. I keep going back to my notes to see what I was missing," Greenberg told the audience on Wednesday evening.

"I was asked by activists in the US to raise with (then-vice-president Al) Gore concerns over the role of the pharmaceutical companies. I knew in my head that this issue was emerging in South Africa."

Even though the issue was important, the political elite decided in the end that the issue was too controversial, too far removed from a "Better Life for All", to be tackled in the election campaign of 1999.

When leaders and their parties chose to ignore issues that were important to the electorate,

this brought inevitable disappointment that would soon hound these leaders and their agendas from office.

Tony Blair's refusal to admit he had blundered on Iraq was precisely one of those moments.

Greenberg said he had urged Blair to admit he had got it wrong on Iraq, to show he had learnt something and to demonstrate, perhaps through his views on climate change, that he was independent from George Bush.

"But he couldn't do it."

From his experience of working with politicians from South Africa and Israel to the US and Bolivia, Greenberg said one of the hallmarks of great leadership was the capacity to acknowledge mistakes, make real changes and move in new directions.

"The biggest fight I have with leaders is to demonstrate that what they think is change is not real.

"With Mbeki, he was willing to take up the acknowledgement of failures. He did radio ads on how disappointed he was with corruption and crime, with the number of jobs created and his determination to create more."

Mandela, on the other hand, "did



Stan Greenberg, international election adviser, is thoughtful about his role in helping the ANC win polls

PICTURE: MXOLISI MADELA

clearly understand and could say we're wrong, we've made a mistake, we apologise. A leader who can say 'we made a mistake' is one who wins people back."

Greenberg brought the skills and techniques of political science, such as focus groups, to the practical art of getting elected in many countries around the world.

While he advised several US politicians in their election bids, it was his work with Bill Clinton that catapulted him to the "most wanted" list of election aides.

He writes about this journey in his recently published book, *Dispatches from the War Room: In the trenches with Five Extraordinary Leaders*.

The five leaders featured in the book are Mandela, Blair, Clinton, Obama and Bolivian president Gonzalo "Goni" Sanchez de Lozada. All

five had in common a progressive, leftish substance to their political visions. This was something with which Greenberg himself identified.

Since undertaking research in South Africa many years ago for a book entitled *Race and State in Capitalist Development*, Greenberg has had an intense interest in the SA struggle.

This connection was at the root of his engagement by Mandela as the ANC's official pollster in 1994.

Even with the experience of pushing Clinton into office, Greenberg's techniques were regarded with suspicion by senior ANC cadres.

When Greenberg questioned the ANC's intended use of the slogan "Now is the Time" as a key element of the party's election strategy in 1994, he was greeted with surprise and amazement.

The slogan, so the ANC contended, was the result of open discussions. It captured a sense of the moment, of history, of change.

Greenberg then proved the party wrong. He held focus groups at which potential voters felt ambivalent about the "Now is the Time" slogan. For them, it didn't signal history or the moment so much as a triumphalist call to arms to African voters.

The slogan "Now is the Time" said that "after all those years of ill-gotten power, the Africans now have their day. It is time for the Africans to control government, to have a seat at the table. The slogan was about settling debts," said Greenberg.

What the ANC didn't understand was that voters were demoralised. They had been subjected to more than three years of up and down negotiations. They were fearful

about the future. Instead, Greenberg and his team coined the phrase "A Better Life for All". The focus groups responded far more positively to this and, once the ANC leadership had been won over, this became the party's clarion call.

"A Better Life for All" remains the tough yardstick by which South Africa's political leadership continue to be judged, said Greenberg.

And if he has learnt one thing during his years as a pollster, it is this: Voters are not spinnable on the things that matter.

They will see through the rhetoric and they will either reward or punish leaders for what they have truly accomplished.

● **Adrian Hadland** is a director in the *Democracy and Governance* research programme of the *Human Sciences Research Council*. He writes in his personal capacity.